

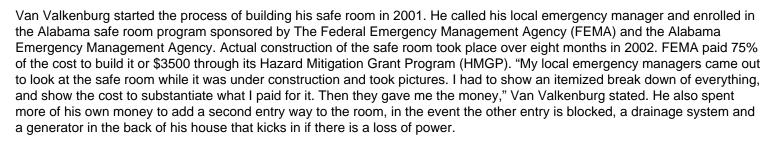
# Taking Shelter: Fire Fighter Protects Family By Building Safe Room

# **Full Mitigation Best Practice Story**

# Autauga County, Alabama

**Autauga County, AL** - After seeing the destruction of his parents' home, an Autauga County fire fighter has decided that it is up to him to keep himself and his family safe from storms.

Robert Van Valkenburg, 52, decided to look into building a tornado safe room for his home after his parents' home was destroyed by a tornado spawned by Hurricane Andrew. "I grew up in that house and it was lost during Hurricane Andrew, so I take this stuff very seriously," says Van Valkenburg. He adds, "When it impacts your family, and you see how it affects them, you take it seriously and say 'Well if it could happen to my mom and dad, it could happen to me."



The safe room got its first test the following spring. Van Valkenburg, his wife, two children, and three dogs stayed in it when a storm system came through and a tornado touched down in the area. "We heard the sirens and went down there in the middle of the night," says Van Valkenburg "I have my pager from the fire department, and when it goes off I know we have severe weather coming into Autauga County. If they say tornado warning we go there." His family also took shelter in it during Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis.

The safe room is 11-by-12 feet and sits ten feet below the ground under a new wing that Van Valkenburg built onto his house for his elderly father-in-law. It is built to be a natural extension of the house. "I knew because of my wife being claustrophobic, I had to design it where it looked like a room or she wouldn't go into it," he said. The room is made of reinforced concrete and has steel doors that lock from the inside. Van Valkenburg has also equipped it with a big, sturdy bed, battery powered televisions, water, non-perishable foods, a first aid kit, power tools and the negatives to all family photos.

"We can come out of there and we can start life again, says Van Valkenburg "That's what it is all about, coming out of the safe room and being able to live."

## **Activity/Project Location**

Geographical Area: Single County in a State

FEMA Region: Region IV

State: Alabama

County: Autauga County

#### **Key Activity/Project Information**

Sector: Public/Private Partnership

Hazard Type: Severe Storm; Tornado; Hurricane/Tropical Storm

Activity/Project Type: Safe Rooms/Community Shelters

Structure Type: Safe Room/Community Shelter

Activity/Project Start Date: **01/2001**Activity/Project End Date: **12/2002** 

Funding Source: Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP); Homeowner

Application/Project Number: 9999

## **Activity/Project Economic Analysis**

Cost: Amount Not Available

#### **Activity/Project Disaster Information**

Mitigation Resulted From Federal

Disaster? Unknown

Value Tested By Disaster? Yes

Tested By Federal Disaster #: No Federal Disaster specified

Year First Tested: 2003

Repetitive Loss Property? Unknown

#### Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/saferoom/index.shtm

Reference URL 2: http://ema.alabama.gov/

#### **Main Points**

- Robert Van Valkenburg decided to look into building a tornado safe room for his home after his parents' home was
  destroyed by a tornado spawned by Hurricane Andrew.
- FEMA paid 75% of the cost to build it or \$3500 through its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP).
- The safe room is 11-by-12 feet and sits ten feet below the ground under a new wing that Van Valkenburg built onto his house for his elderly father-in-law.



Robert Van Valkenburg Outside His Home



The Van Valkenburg's Safe Room